

Earthly Pleasures

By Nancy G. Freeman

The driveway at Rick and Kristie Knoll's Brentwood farm creeps inward, enclosing my car in a cocoon of plants. Bushes lean forward and reach for the doors and leaves brush against the hubcaps. Weeds poke up everywhere and wild flowers threaten to take over. What is this place, a farm or some kind of nature preserve?

A little bit of both, in fact—for the Knolls are no ordinary farmers. They call the farming principles they practice “beyond organic” and weeds are not a major concern. Rick and Kristie use no herbicides or pesticides, instead building the soil to produce strong, parasite-resistant crops. They plant wild flowers to attract the natural enemies of those parasites and urge them to move right in and feast. Many chefs agree the results are some of the finest fruits, vegetables and herbs grown anywhere in the state,

The farm, if slightly unkempt around the edges, buzzes with life and energy—not just thriving plants, but bugs, birds, squirrels and an occasional coyote. And right at the center of this dynamic brew are Rick, his shoulder-length hair sun-bleached blond, his complexion a permanent red, and Kristie with sinewy arms and hair cropped close like a cap. Though they come from different backgrounds, they are so thoroughly in tune they can finish each other's sentences with ease.

Rick and Kristie didn't plan to become farmers but “just oozed into it.” Kristie's background is in music while Rick, a Ph.D. in organic chemistry, was working at the Livermore lab when they decided to grow some of their own food. They turned their yard into an organic garden and planted way too much. The excess melons were the first crop they ever sold.

In 1979, they bought a 10-acre alfalfa farm in Brentwood—a tremendous leap. With no clear-cut plan, they sold the alfalfa and planted 600 fruit trees, selecting varieties to bear early, middle and late in the season. “We just wanted to graze,” says Kristie. But it wasn't long before the farming bug bit. Having worked as a chemist in the aerospace industry for six years, the last thing Rick wanted to do was pour chemicals onto his crops and into the soil. They farmed organically, eventually achieving certification by the state. Meanwhile, Rick began to think more and more about soil and the microorganisms that compose it. He decided he needed another degree, this time in agroecology.

But instead of finishing the degree, he discovered biodynamic farming (see sidebar). While studying at U.C. Santa Cruz, his chemistry background “just clicked” with that of a microbiologist in the same program. They read the work of Rudolf Steiner, the father of biodynamic farming together. Rick bought some “potions,” as he calls the preparations recommended by Steiner, and applied them to his soil, his compost and his crops. He and Kristie watched as the crops prospered. They became convinced that the secret to quality produce is quality soil. As they built the soil, Rick began testing and applying his own

potions. Soon more and more chefs, wholesalers and market shoppers were seeking out their produce.

Today purchasers are willing to pay top dollar for the Knolls' products because they are worth it. I ask chef Kelly Degala of Walnut Creek's Va de Vi why he buys their rosemary, lavender, pea greens and thyme. "Why don't you ask me something difficult?" he says. "Their product is outstanding. I couldn't get anything better than what they have."

Within the last few years, the Knolls have given up on the time and paperwork involved in certification and moved "beyond organic." Based loosely on the French term *terroir*, or essence of place, they created a new label and logo, Tairwá. "We never really wanted to have so much publicity," says Rick. "We just wanted to break away and try to reinvent farming from an ecological viewpoint." With the new label has come a commitment to education. At the farmers' market, Kristie explains that the choices shoppers make about what they eat have ripple effects way beyond their own lives. Rick finds himself writing articles and speaking at conferences. Their website urges people to be "responsible and empowered consumers."

Recognition and financial success have given the Knolls a platform to express their views and opinions—and they're not short on either. By far their biggest target is industrial farming and the scientific community that supports it. "Chemical farming is based on lies," says Rick. The universities, he charges, just want to create products that can be sold and are in the pockets of the chemical companies.

They are seriously concerned with the rise of corporate organic farming as well. "Conventional and industrial organic farming are very similar in what they do to the soil," says Rick. "A whole business has arisen to supply the industry." He blames this fact on organic farmers—himself included—for failing to set clear-cut rules. "We never said what you need to do; all we said was 'you can't.'"

Even when it comes to biodynamic farming, the Knolls march to their own drummer. They have not sought certification from the Demeter Association because they feel the movement has become something of a cult. "Steiner wouldn't even be part of the biodynamic movement today," says Rick. "He would object to being turned into a saint."

But they agree wholeheartedly with its principles. At the heart of biodynamic farming lies the belief that the farm is a single ecosystem to be cultivated for its unique character. The farmer is an integral part of that ecosystem, who must rely on intuition to understand the whole. "That's the magical part," says Rick. "I can't really define it."

Outside their office building sit three huge cement vats filled with fruits and grasses in various stages of fermentation. The smell is not pretty. Figs, plums, apricots—all of the contents come from the farm. Each potion must go through three separate biological processes and be thoroughly stirred. Then small quantities will be dissolved in water and applied back to the farm.

Kristie and I walk through the wide beds divided from each other by stands of fruit trees and surrounded by chest-high hedges of rosemary. Most of the trees have finished bearing for the year. The beds are in different stages of growth and decay. Kristie plucks leaves of intensely-flavored peppermint and yerba buena, which, she says, only began to sell at the market when she rechristened it “mojito mint.” I take a bite. Its piercing flavor begs to be used in mixed drinks, marinades and ceviches. She points to a bed of horseradish. In addition to selling the roots for grating, she sells the leaves as wrappers for roasted fish or chicken.

The air is hot and dusty in these beds, but, as we walk into the fig grove, the temperature drops at least ten degrees. The broad leaves filter the light like stained glass in an old cathedral and the trees give off a mysterious scent of coconuts. The trees at the center are older and bigger. Kristie walks up to the largest, the “grandma” fig, and strokes a leaf. She sells fig leaves as wrappers too and they impart this coconut-like aroma to whatever is inside. But it is the figs themselves, available from June through October, for which the Knolls are best known.

“When you pick them up, they’re heavier than any other fig,” says chef/owner Peter Chastain of Walnut Creek’s Prima. “It’s the density of sugar. I like to stand on the other side of the room from people and watch their jaws drop.”

Alas, there are no ripe figs now. But as we walk back toward the barn, a truck pulls up loaded with boxes of sun-kissed cherry tomatoes from an adjoining field. Rick and the workers bring them into the barn where they glow a bright yellow-orange. I sneak one and it pops in my mouth releasing a cascade of juice. It is hot like condensed Brentwood sunlight with the sweetest, purest tomato essence. I reach greedily for more. “I can’t stop eating them myself,” says Kristie.

We feast and feast. There is indeed something magical about it. And I can’t define it either.

Biodynamic Farming

In 1924, Austrian educator/philosopher/scientist Rudolf Steiner gave a series of eight lectures in response to a group of farmers concerned about the declining fertility of their soil. Chemical farming was on the rise and Steiner was convinced that it was the chemicals that were depleting the soil.

These lectures evolved into the practice of biodynamic farming. Steiner viewed the farm as a self-contained organism, plants, animals and farmer satisfying all their own needs. Nutrients were recycled as animals grazed on the harvested fields and provided fertilizer for the next crop. To be truly productive, he believed, the farm had to be fully in touch with both the earthly and the cosmic, or what he called the biological and the dynamic. Biological practices included organic farming techniques—composting, cover crops and

crop rotation—while the dynamic included use of lunar and astrological charts for planting, harvesting and composting.

In addition, Steiner prescribed nine preparations, combinations of plant, animal and mineral substances, to be fermented, then applied to soil, compost and plants in highly dilute amounts after a prolonged stirring process known as dynamization. These preparations were to be made by the farmer himself. A soil spray consisted of manure packed in cow horns and buried to ferment through the autumn and winter, and a plant stimulant of powdered quartz buried in a horn through the spring and summer.

A number of California wineries use biodynamic practices to produce excellent wine. They include Robert Sinskey Vineyards in Napa County, Benzinger Family Winery in Sonoma County and Fetzer Vineyards in Lake County.